

A Reschio house, finished down to the china and glassware

ating your dream home in Tuscany doesn't have to
an months of hard labour, says KAREN ROBINSON

was fortunate for the American writer Frances Mayes that she had fallen completely in love with her patch of olive-shaded hillside. Otherwise, as writes in *Bella Tuscany*, of her bestselling books on bringing an old house near Cortona, the For Sale sign had gone up one day. "Neither well pump is working: a grinding noise in the old well, a search for the new well. We peer into the cistern..."

You get the picture. Though she came through years of hard work by builders, mounting the jets and linguistic misunderstandings to create her dream home — and she has a packet romanticising her experience in her books and a film starring Diane Lane — her story provides a reality check for anybody who wants to follow in her footsteps.

Consider, by contrast, the experience of Sarah Cheshire, an investment banker from London, north London. On a hillside in Umbria, half an hour from Cortona, she has just finished converting, decorating and furnishing a ruined farmhouse into a dramatic house with pool and landscaped garden. She paid for the ruin in April, but then fell ill and couldn't travel for six months. "At the end," she says, "had all the things of a *Grand Designs* 'hardy' moment. 'I've signed Kevin McCloud. How's this going to work now Sarah's in hospital?' When I finally went to see it was getting on, it was as if it was meant to be."

Cheshire had discovered an alternative to the do-it-yourself route. She had already bought a house in Normandy to do up, but the business of finding buyers and keeping them on "hold" frustrated her so much that she "abdicated" the shebang to her mother, who is still trying to get it finished seven years on. This time she used one of a small number of enterprising developers who are taking on ruins in Tuscany and Umbria and

offering buyers the finished product — a restored, decorated home, sometimes even furnished, with community facilities and after-sales service — at prices from €250,000 (£170,000) to €5m-plus (£3.4m).

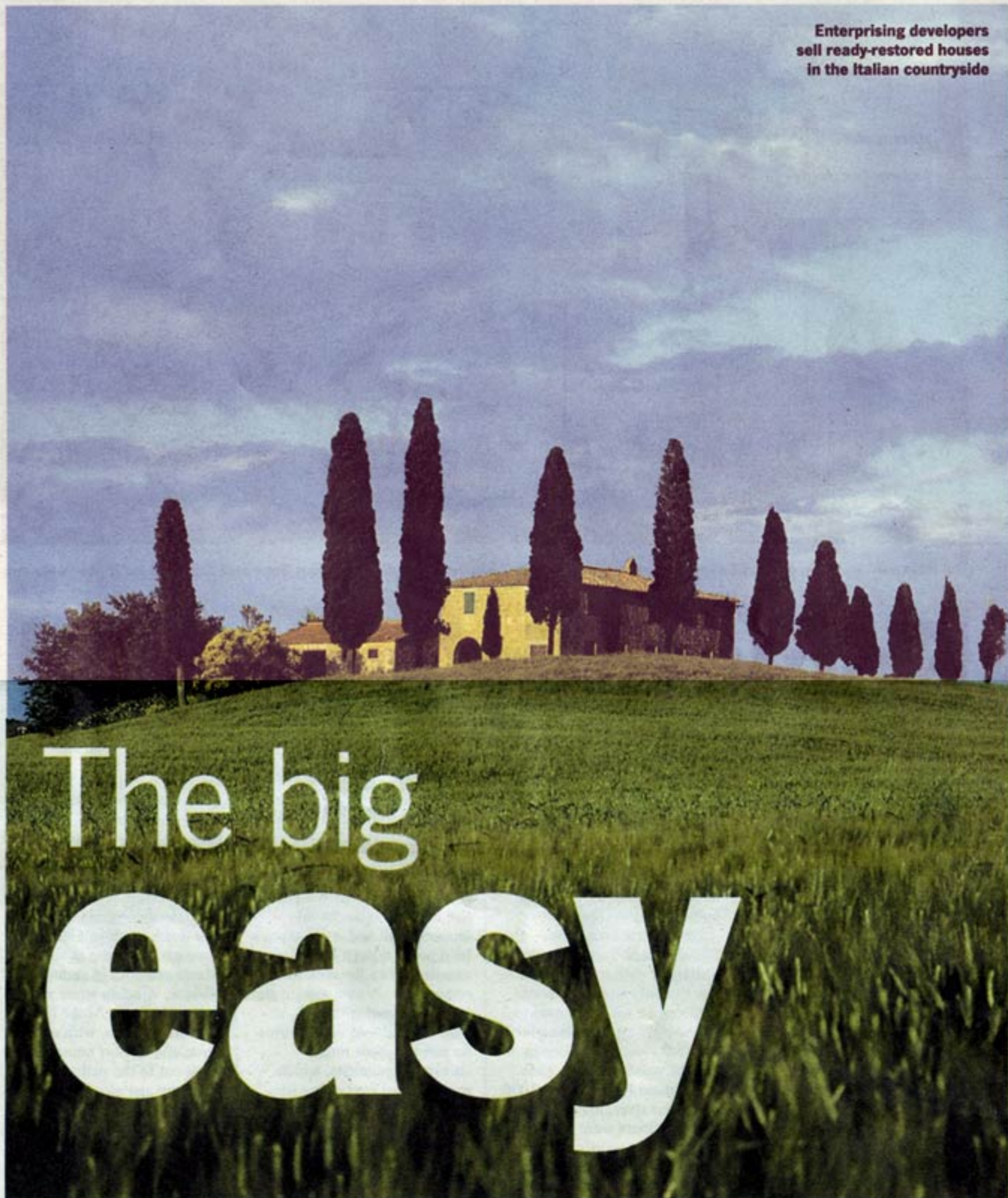
She bought her farmhouse from Monteverdi. The company "sources, sells and does up" houses in the area and, says commercial director Daniel Walker, has six similar wrecks available at the moment plus "10 more in the pipeline".

"We sell the houses at a fixed price for the finished deal. Andrew Bowen, our architect, oversees the conversion, and we work with the client to produce a bespoke design." They sort out land title and planning issues, recruit teams of builders, fitters and landscapers and see the project through in every detail.

Cheshire wanted a modern house but understood that planning issues meant "it had to look like an Umbrian farmhouse — it was rebuilt using the original old stone — but we managed to make it modern inside". There is even a dazzling white resin floor in the open-plan living area. She was able to follow the project's progress on the Monteverdi website, where her own secure pages were updated every week with photographs and a report.

Cheshire's four-bedroom, four-bath farmhouse cost close to £1m, the price agreed upfront with Monteverdi, which she paid in four instalments. She's not sure if a DIY version of the project would have saved her money, but says: "The point is I couldn't have done it. And I think it's now worth more than I've paid, and I should have a good rental income."

Norman Thompson, a garage owner from Gloucestershire, says: "I had always promised myself I'd have a place in Italy, in a small village where I could spend two or three months at a time. I looked at property, but nothing appealed, and I didn't want to spend £200,000 on a house and only use it two or three weeks a year."



Enterprising developers sell ready-restored houses in the Italian countryside

The big easy

Then he and his wife, Ann, discovered Borgo di Colleoli, 40 minutes from Pisa airport, a development of restored farm buildings with two swimming pools, an exquisitely refurbished Renaissance villa that is now a boutique hotel and two restaurants in a 23-acre estate, where last year they bought the freehold on a furnished, air-conditioned one-bedroom flat for £160,000. They have the use of their

apartment for six weeks a year, and rental return of at least 5% on their investment, guaranteed for three years when they bought, although Thompson is "not worried about when the guarantee runs out".

The Colleoli company markets and manages the busy holiday lettings side and maintains the apartment and the community infrastructure — the Thompsons' contribution of several thousand euros a year is deducted from their rental income — leaving them little to do except enjoy rural Tuscany.

And they had no share in the angst of getting the development completed. "You have to have the correct experience and the correct team around you," explains managing director Ronnie Hogg Cameron. "We had a great *geometra* [a cross between a surveyor and an architect] who'd done villas for

Paul Smith, the clothes designer, but even so, we were a year late opening."

Of the 67 one- and two-bed apartments in the old wine store, stables, farm offices and storage buildings, only two are for sale — both resales from off-plan buyers who have made a tidy profit, outstripping the average Tuscan rate of 10%-12% a year, since they bought three years ago, with prices from £170,000 to £270,000.

In a secluded valley just a couple of miles away, a scattering of ruined farm buildings is the next Colleoli project. It will become the Valley Apartments, some 17 units with communal swimming pools and access to the facilities of the Borgo. Prices start at £180,000 rising to £340,000.

In Maremma, Tuscany's less accessible, more agricultural

southwestern quarter, near the small town of Roccalbegna, is Il Poderone. This once-derelect borgo (a hamlet with agricultural buildings) is now being rebuilt as 29 apartments and houses with enviable views from its commanding hilltop location.

It took five years to get planning permission to convert the two sound structures and build, in traditional rustic stone, another seven. All the units have their own outdoor space — terrace or garden — and the whole complex, with landscaping, pool and a house for the resident concierges, should be finished this summer.

Several are already sold — including a one-bedroom house with the best views of all, across to a castle on a distant hilltop, for £160,000 — and prices for the remaining units start at £110,000 for a small flat to £255,000 for a





World Pictures

Counts Niki, Antonio and Benedikt Bolza, above, restore houses on the Reschio estate in Umbria



Sarah Cheshire's house is traditionally rustic on the outside and uncompromisingly modern within



Perfectly groomed gardens match Reschio's lavish houses

three-bedroom semi-detached house. Annual service charges will probably be £500-£700, says Lynne Davie of joint selling agent Lore Living Services, but she points out that at prices per square metre of between £2,700 and £3,500. Maremma is cheaper than areas of Tuscany such as Chianti, where €4,000 per square metre is the norm.

But if you're not counting the euros, you should perhaps make the acquaintance of Count Antonio Bolza and his family. Originally north Italian aristocrats, the Bolzas had a few centuries of colourful *Mitteleuropa* life before their return to Italy, when Antonio bought the Reschio estate near Mercatale in Umbria. As well as 2,000 acres of agricultural and hunting land, he acquired a castle, an old tobacco factory and 34 derelict farmhouses. And he's since added a neighbouring 800 acres and 10 more houses to his domain.

He explains his vision for the estate. "The formula is simple: to open it up to a limited number of interested people to join us here on the estate. You can't attract an international clientele without full service and maintenance after the house is completed. This is not a development where the developer disappears when it's done." He lives in a house on the estate, and his son, Count Benedikt, lives in the castle with his wife, Donna Nencia — daughter of a Florentine princess — and their children.

So far, they have sold and rebuilt 17 houses. Benedikt, a qualified architect, oversees the work, achieving impressive concessions from the local planning authority, including a staircase in a two-storey glass tower linking the wings of a massive fortified house that stands guard over the valley boundary with Tuscany.

Each house is finished in a different style, but the work always begins with digging down to put in foundations, lowering the floors and enlarging windows (a planning

concession not always granted to rural restorers) to get decent height and light in the ground floors. The houses are unashamedly large and luxurious — underfloor heating, magnificent kitchens and bathrooms — and Benedikt is adamant that all the work is of the highest standard. "We have to manage the properties, so if you short-cut on quality you have to deal with it later."

His brother Count Niki was responsible for the interiors of some of the houses. Each house is sold with a couple of acres of landscaped garden, unfenced to blend in with the surrounding estate land, and a couple even come with their own vineyards.

The farmhouses have stone tobacco-drying huts, which convert handily into pool houses, or laundry rooms where the estate maids can work without disturbing the household. They are just one of the services offered, which include running holiday rentals for owners and limos to pick up homeowners from the airport. More will come when the plan to turn the castle into a hotel is realised.

The Bolzas will not disclose what an English family paid for the seven-bedroom house they bought five years ago, which was ready to move into, down to the tasteful furniture and pictures, two years later. But such a house at Reschio nowadays would cost a minimum of £3.4m. One of the ruins, which will take up to two years to transform into a five-bedroom house, is for sale at £2.4m — that's the price of the "project" including pool and landscaping, but not interior decoration. A larger one, with potential for seven bedrooms, could be "€5-€6m (£3.4m-£4m), depending on the project".

Or, muses Benedikt, you could always find your own ruin, negotiate the planning permission, recruit the right builders and do it all yourself, but then you should "forget about your job at home".

ON THE MARKET



A farmhouse, of 4,800sq ft on the Reschio estate, is to be restored to a six-bed house with a pool. The price, depending on design, starts at £2.4m. Castello di Reschio, 00 39 075 844 362, www.reschio.com



Monteverdi (020 7661 9342, www.monteverdi-estates.com) will restore this ruin set in six acres, a 20-minute drive from Cortona, into a four-bed villa with a pool for £1.3m



A one-bedroom flat, one of 17, in the converted Valley Apartments at the Borgo di Colleoli, half an hour's drive from Pisa, is for sale for £205,000. Savills, 020 7016 3740, www.savills.com



The restoration of Il Poderone, near Roccalbegna, is due to be completed this summer. A one-bed flat in this building, with shared pool, is for sale for £110,000. Savills, 020 7016 3740